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Burial Customs of the Wa-Kavirondo in the Kisumu Province. 35

By A. S. Millikin

764 When a Kavirondo dies he or she, as the case may be, is stripped of everything in the shape of clothing and ornaments and these, as a rule, are distributed amongst the children, should the dead person have any; if not, they are taken by the near relatives. As soon as the person has expired the relatives in the same "boma" commence howling and crying, and in some cases this is done before the sick person has expired, but is close to death.

The first persons informed of the death are those relatives and friends residing close at hand, who arrive quickly to join in the mourning and do their share of crying.

The relatives and friends from a distance begin to arrive decked out in all their finery, bringing food for the dead, and also some of their cattle, as a rule a few cow and [765] bull calves. The mourning lasts for about a fortnight, but the body is kept only for about five hours after death, when it is buried underneath the floor of the hut of the dead person; but should several people have been buried there before and no space left, the body is buried just outside the hut, on the left-hand side.

As a rule after one person is buried in the hut, if it is intended to bury a second, and even a third person in the same hut, it is customary to knock out the back part of the hut and enlarge it.

775 The Kavirondo belief is that the dead can hear, and this is their reason for burying their dead in and close to their huts, as they like the dead to hear what they say.

764 The grave is dug about 4 feet deep and is circular, and the dead person is put there in a doubled-up position. The body is buried quite naked, but sometimes the skin on which the person slept, or which he wore, is placed at the bottom of the grave.

When the grave is filled up, the earth is put back in small pieces, and is pressed tightly down, so that when all the soil is put back the surface is absolutely level, and to the casual observer it would not appear that the earth had been disturbed. As a precaution against hyænas and other wild animals a species of cactus is placed for a few days over the grave.

765 Should the dead person be a grown male, the wife or mother or the nearest relative of the dead man will cry continually for three months for about an hour before day break, but will stop when day breaks.

A peculiar custom is followed by the near relatives, who, during the first few days of mourning, smear their faces with wood ashes.

764 When a grown-up person dies, male or female, neighbours will come and hold a "ngoma" (dance), dressed up in all their finery, especially the warriors, who walk into the "boma" and march round on the inside, passing the hut of the dead person and sticking their spears into the roof of the hut. They continue to march round two or three times, finally passing the dead person's hut and withdrawing their spears,

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when they pass outside; this happens before the "ngoma," and is a sort of honour to the dead.

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The wife or wives of the deceased person go to the sons, the eldest having preference, but in no case does a son take his own mother, and any property of the deceased man is taken by the sons in the proportion of the dowry originally paid by the father for the wife which each son has claimed.

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Should a wife of the dead man have a daughter, or several daughters and sons, the dowry received in the event of one of them being married will go to the girl's brother, and not to the step-father; but in the event of the girl having no brother, the step-father will claim the dowry.

A. S. MILLIKIN.

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